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Animas River spill 'huge tragedy,' EPA officials tell Durango gathering

EPA director: 'It's hard being on other side of this'

By Bruce Finley
The Denver Post

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DURANGO — While EPA crews began digging a treatment pond at the blown-out Gold King Mine 60 miles to the north, Durango residents whose lives revolve around water woke up Friday to see the Animas River running bright yellow-orange — contaminated with heavy metals.

Some wept openly. And from store clerks on Main Street to county officials at an emerging basement command post they are asking one overriding question: "What is in the water?"

During a packed community meeting Friday afternoon in Durango, Dave Ostrander, the Environmental Protection Agency's Region 8 director of emergency preparedness, said the major part of the contamination has moved through the area but the river will closed for the time being.

"We are very sorry for what happened. This is a huge tragedy," Ostrander told the crowd. "It's hard being on the other side of this. Typically we respond to emergencies, we don't cause them. ... It's something we sincerely regret."

Ostrander said the wastewater from the mine contains lead, arsenic, cadmium, aluminium, copper and calcium along with other sediments in "varying levels."

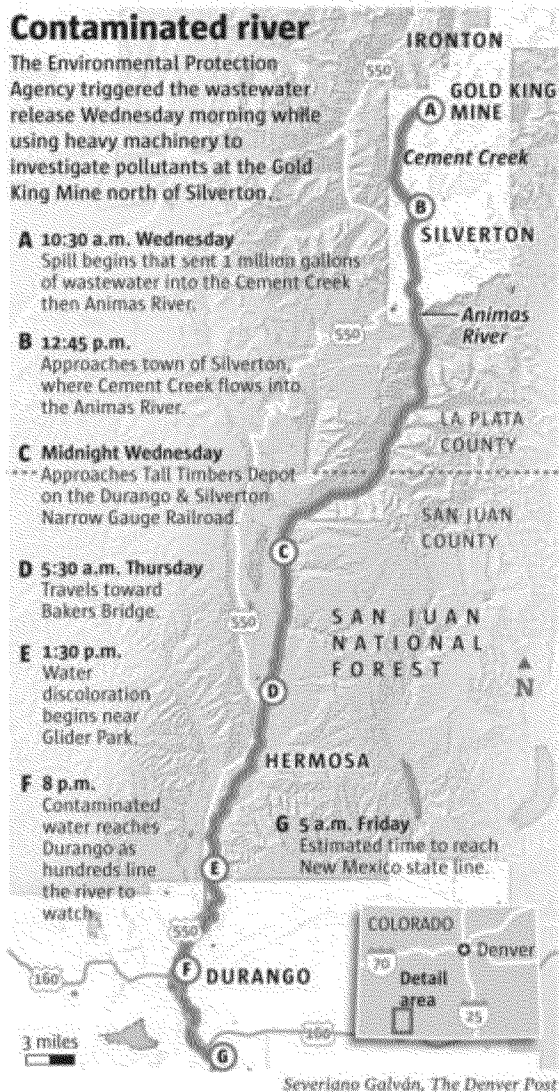
He later added, "we are responsible for this and we are not running anywhere."

EPA administrator Shaun McGrath said the initial reaction to the spill was "not appropriate" because environmental officials didn't think there was as much water there as came out.

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"Our initial reaction was not fully accurate. We saw immediate cause for concern to Silverton," McGrath said. "We weren't anticipating impacts downstream. As a result, the messages you may have heard the first day were not appropriate."

"We did (Thursday), after understanding better, very much change our response. We're really amping up our effort. Unfortunately our early comments may have sounded cavalier for the public health and wildlife."



(The Denver Post)

The meeting at the La Plata County administration building was the first time the EPA spoke publicly about the accident. Friday morning, they met with local officials.

"We have received no information from the EPA," La Plata County director of emergency management Butch Knowlton said Friday morning. "We're anxiously waiting for test results. It is very frustrating at the local level that we do not have specific information on what is in the river."

San Juan Basin public health director Liane Jollon was trying to reach Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment officials, who told her the EPA was handling the emergency.

"It's not safe for humans, pets or livestock — until we hear from the EPA," Jollon said.

The accident happened Wednesday morning when EPA mine crews were trying to deal with dangerous levels of toxic wastewater filling up the abandoned mine. Only a dirt barrier kept the

crumbling mine opening from leaking into Cement Creek. And as the EPA crew was working, the wastewater blew through the barrier.

Early estimate says at least 1 million gallons spilled into the creek, eventually reaching the Animas River.

Ostrander said an acid discharge still leaking from Gold King Mine but bright orange is turning murkier — maybe indicating "tail end of that nastiness."

State Sen. Ellen Roberts, who sat by the river in Durango for eight hours and tried to warn residents playing in the water on Thursday, was in the basement of the county courthouse Friday morning at the command post.

"It's incredible that we don't know more," Roberts said. "We have the equivalent of an EPA-caused Love Canal here. And we still didn't know what was coming. ... It is unacceptable. We are all held up — because we don't know the water test results.

"The EPA caused it. And the EPA has taken the 'lead role.' The problem is the EPA has left us totally disarmed. The biggest problem now is public health and safety."

U.S. Senators Cory Gardner and Michael Bennet said they had talked with the EPA and after the cleanup is finished, the attention will turn to the cause.

"Once we are through the immediate and emergency responses, we will all need to investigate how this happened," Bennet said in a statement. "Not only so that we can get answers about this disaster, but so that we can prevent it from happening again."

Added Gardner: "Coloradans deserve to know the EPA's plan for cleaning up the mess they've made and their plan for the long term restoration of the river habitat impacted."

At the Gold King Mine, EPA crews on Friday were building a wastewater retention pond where they can begin to treat heavy metals discharge, said the EPA's mine on-scene coordinator Hayes Griswold.

Griswold told The Denver Post he believes the acidity of the Animas River as it flows through Durango is approximately Ph 5.8 — more acidic than usual but not deadly.

"That's about as acidic as acid rain. It's not bad," Griswold said.

Cadmium may be present in the wastewater, he said, and other main components include zinc and iron oxide.

"We are taking lots of samples," he said.

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